

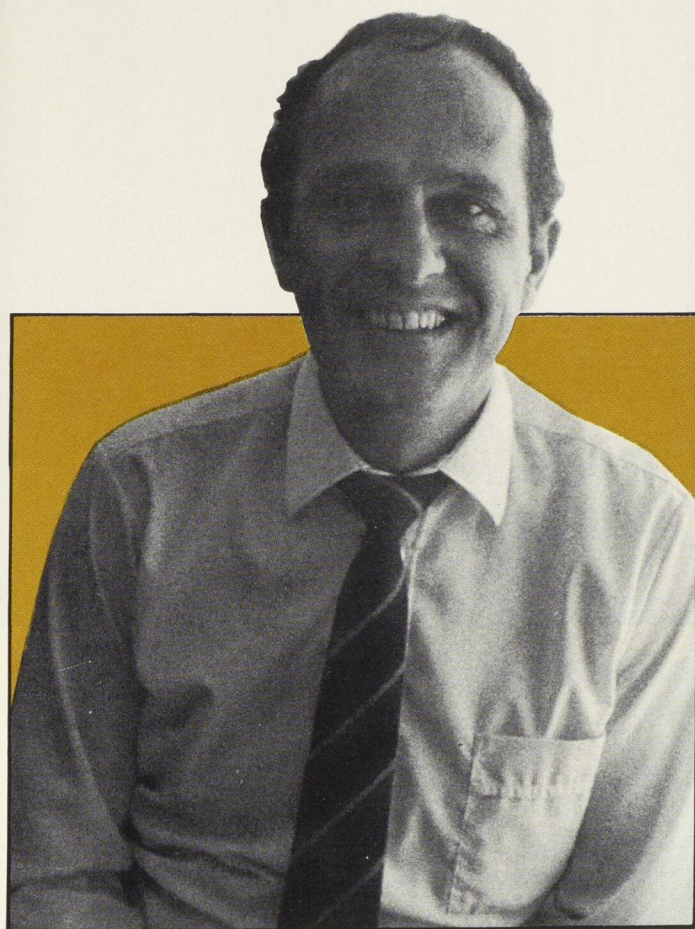
Swift Completion

by Bill Atkinson

Peter Wolters is an information specialist at NRC's Canada Institute for Scientific and Technical Information (CISTI), and he has a problem. He needs to send a message to a colleague in another department of the federal government in Ottawa. She is in an all-day meeting and cannot be reached by phone; the message, while important, is not urgent enough to pull her from the meeting. But a standard typed letter would require an hour to process, proof, and send, and another day or two to reach its recipient. A courier could deliver a note within half a day, but at high cost; a phone message dictated to a secretary can be only so long before errors creep in; and a simple request-to-call might mean that Wolters himself was unavailable when his colleague called back. What to do?

Wolters' situation is maddeningly common; his solution is not. He simply swivels to face a small computer terminal atop his desk, and types his special account code. NO NEW MESSAGES, the screen responds. Peter Wolters has just checked his mailbox. Swiftly he inputs his colleague's name, instructs the machine to put a copy of forthcoming text in his own file, and types the message to his associate. His words will stay in a central file until their recipient looks in her own 'mailbox' via her own desk terminal. The message will remain completely confidential until retrieved and responded to. Peter Wolters has just used a system which may soon revolutionize the way Canadians communicate with one another. It is called electronic mail.

"Private business in North America," says Wolters, "has been looking with alarm at its growing paperburden. Sure there's an information explosion, which is both cause and result of the computer. But business has begun to realize that most of its information needn't be 'hard copy' — that is, print on paper. Much of it is for transient use: it's obsolete the instant it's acted on. And much of what



Dr. Peter Wolters has helped develop various types of electronic mail for use with CISTI's Canadian On-Line Enquiry (CAN/OLE) system.

remains can be more easily filed, retrieved, and massaged when it's electronic."

The businesses now experimenting with these electronic mail systems are betting that they will soon assume the importance that paper mail has today — that they will revolutionize routine inter-office communication in the 1980's and beyond. It seems a pretty good bet. Explains Peter Wolters: "Electronic mail can do virtually everything hard-copy mail does, but without paper. Here at CISTI we're also looking at applications for these systems that go far beyond mere message transfer. Once you've put data